

This week I paid a visit to four small Ukrainian military units scattered across rural Mykolaiv and Kherson regions, areas which had been occupied by the Russians. The signs of “Russky Mir” (Putin’s much vaunted ‘Russian world’) are everywhere: piles of breeze block and rebar that used to be businesses; modest family homes riddled with bullet holes; and just past the verges of roads abloom with Spring wildflowers, mine fields. What’s striking, however, is how much public infrastructure has been repaired by the Ukrainian government. In addition to beat-up tracks that wouldn’t have been out of place in rural Congo, we also drove on newly paved highways and crossed rebuilt bridges.



But the enemy is not far away, and at one point we were about three miles from their positions where we were forced to detour due to Russian shelling. Fortunately it was a windy, drizzly day which meant that their attack drones were mostly grounded. As any Ukrainian soldier will tell you, there are few sounds more nerve wracking than the high pitched whir of a kamikaze drone overhead. A children's plastic toy with a mortar strapped to it.

My road trip partner was the indefatigable Elena Kolomiets who drove her overloaded 2004 SUV like a banshee, all the while chatting merrily with me through our respective cellphones' Google Translate apps. An exhausting but fascinating 13 hours. I've mentioned Elena before but it's worth mentioning a few things about this tiny 50-something woman who regularly ferries supplies, including home cooked food, to frontline units. She was born during the Soviet era in Kazakhstan where her family had been exiled by Stalin (the same monstrosity who's been rehabilitated as a hero of modern Russia).

Her son joined the fight against the invaders but was killed after stepping on a mine last year. Her only daughter has found refuge in New Mexico, where she's raising three children, including one with cerebral palsy, as a single mom who spoke very little English when she arrived. A lesser mortal might have been crushed by this sort of adversity, but Elena seems to feed on it, deriving deep satisfaction from helping the men in uniform. (FYI there are of course brave women in the Ukrainian forces, but so far I've only encountered men on my trips).

And speaking of the men, they're the epitome of civilian soldiers. Mostly working class guys in their 30s, although there were a few in their 20s and 50s. I met a former garage owner, IT administrator, factory worker, and welder. Others had earned their livings in factories or on farms before the war. One burly guy sporting a beard worthy of a Viking had been a massage therapist, and was of course the only one in his unit who didn't smoke. Arriving at the dilapidated little villages where they're based, we dropped off combat trauma kits and boxes of food, socks, OTC medicines and of course big pails of borscht which Elena had cooked. They seemed genuinely moved by our visit, and pressed little tokens of appreciation on me, including unit badges and a signed flag. They were slightly apprehensive about the possibility of being rotated up to Kharkiv where the Russians have been gaining ground in the past week, but took it in stride. When I told one guy to "stay alive", he grinned and replied "We'll try!". Not for the first time, I was struck by the fact that those Western potentates upon whom Ukraine's future depends (I'm talking to you Tony Blinken) almost invariably stay close to the well-protected, well scrubbed center of Kyiv. My advice: come to Ukraine's heartland, backwaters like Bashtanka and Snihurivka. You'll be welcomed and you might even learn a thing or two.



